Overcoming Marriage Problems: Start focusing on solutions

By Richard Nicastro, Ph.D.

When a troubled couple comes to me for relationship help, one of the first questions I ask is, "What have you already done to try to solve these relationship problems?"

Several issues immediately become apparent as I listen to these distressed couples:

1. Many of them didn't have a plan to address their struggles;
2. A good percentage of these couples end up repeating what wasn't working to begin with;
3. If these couples do have a plan, the plan is too vague and offers little direction.

Relationship Help: 3 steps to building a solutions-focused union

Step one: make sure you're on the same page

One of the big challenges for couples is that they often don't see eye to eye about the existence and nature of their marriage or relationship problems. All too often couples counselors hear one partner (often the husband) say that things are just fine, while the other partner reads off a list of what's not working.

I often respond to this dilemma with the following: Your relationship is made up of two people. If one person feels there is some kind of relationship problem, then fifty percent of the relationship is unhappy! You can be certain that if fifty percent of a company's employees are not happy, that business is in big trouble—the same holds true for your marriage or relationship. In this case, it's the responsibility of both partners (this includes the person saying, "Everything is just fine!") to address the issue(s) at hand.

Step two: Immediately stop what isn't working

When relationships are in trouble, couples often get caught in cycles of negativity. Too many couples attempt to have conversations about a certain marriage problem or relationship issue that simply lead nowhere (or worse, that repeatedly lead to increased conflict or feelings of hopelessness about the relationship). When problem-discussions don't work, you need to stop having these conversations—picking at a scab will not make it heal.

This isn't a form of denial or putting your head in the sand. You're simply hitting the pause button on focusing on what isn't working.

Step three: Create a plan that focuses on solutions

Let's assume that something isn't working in your marriage or relationship (or maybe the relationship feels okay but you want to make it even stronger). Maybe a troubling distance has been growing between the two of you and you'd like to bridge the gap. Now that you've identified something about the relationship that is of concern (in this case, distance), the next step is to create a plan that gives solutions to the relationship problem.

Replace problem-discussions with solution-focused discussions.

It's important that the plan you and your spouse/partner develop is specific and concrete. Too many couples never follow through on this step after identifying what isn't working.
Each person should write down what s/he is going to do to overcome the problem—in other words, you each focus on the behaviors you are going to change (don't focus on the other person). To address the issue of a growing distance, you might write down the following solutions: Spend five minutes each morning expressing gratitude for what is working in the relationship; checking in with each other at least once during the workday; taking turns in the evening talking about what was good and challenging about your respective days; each weekend do something fun together.

Notice how the above plan is specific and leads to concrete action steps that target the identified problem.

There are times when directing your energies to what isn't working in the relationship simply brings more of the same. Cycles of negativity need to be broken if you and your partner are going to move your marriage or relationship in the right direction. This requires work, patience, and discipline from both parties. A mutual commitment to solutions can be the elixir your marriage/relationship needs.

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**Author Bio**

Over the past fifteen years Richard Nicastro, Ph.D. has helped couples build stronger, more fulfilling marriages and relationships. Dr. Nicastro has lectured at several universities and now conducts workshops for couples on a wide range of issues. His relationship advice has appeared on television, radio and in national magazines. A member of the International Coach Federation, Dr. Nicastro is passionate about coaching and believes that healthy relationships can add meaning and fulfillment to our lives. His goal is to guide individuals and couples as they implement the skills that will allow their relationships to flourish.

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